

## Reflections on a Conference

### Putting partnership at the top of the agenda

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*If you have read this far you will realise that this edition of Encounters largely attempts to reproduce the papers given at the conference on Asian mission held recently at Redcliffe College under the auspices of the College, CMS and OMF. I was present at all the sessions (except when there were two going on at the same time!) and was asked to give a brief reflection as part of the final session. I notice that each of my paragraphs makes the same point. I leave the reader to work out what that is!*

My first response is to say how helpful it was to have Patrick's clear and insightful account of the situation in China, a masterful mixture of appropriate statistics, historical and theological analysis, and incidents and illustrations from his own experience. (I am referring here to Dr Patrick Fung's Redcliffe Lecture, China and Beyond: Issues, Trends and Opportunities – see Article 1 in this edition.) It was the combination of elements that I found particularly helpful. Statistics alone can be boring or misleading. Historical and theological analyses are necessary but are wonderfully enlivened and validated by a contributor who can speak from relevant and recent personal experience.

With regard to the general topic of the consultation – the partnership between the growing Asian missionary movements and the churches and mission agencies in the West – I notice that one of our stated purposes was to share 'positive models and stories' and we have done this. But I do also think that this conference may have prompted us to realise that we are basically short on research and reflection – the patient, careful scholarly examination of key topics such as partnership. Of course, our speakers have set us on our way, but partnership throws up many issues: the continuing role of ethnic particularity in our planning, the challenge of multicultural teams, the need for better conflict resolution, a better understanding of the impact of economic globalisation and so on. The briefing notes ask us about the possibility of 'an annual gathering or ongoing network', suggesting that this might be necessary. But that is my point. Further study needs to be facilitated, it needs ongoing commitment and effort, and perhaps we are not ready for that.

I wonder whether we have been a little triumphalistic, as we evangelicals are inclined to be. It was certainly encouraging to hear about the growth of Asian missions and the various models of partnership, but have we sufficiently emphasised the difficulties? Issues of power differences, economic disparities, cultural pride, historical accidents, theological misunderstandings are going to make the way ahead far from easy. Overall there may be a dangerous lack of specificity.

We need to ask 'where do we go from here'? It is the same question that Jesus asked his disciples: 'How shall we describe the kingdom of God?' What does the Bible teach? If Jew and Gentile can work together, why not us? What does 'the one new person' of Ephesians 2 look like? It has often struck me that 'partnership in the gospel' is to a large extent what the Apostle Paul's letters are all about. He realised how difficult it would be for Jew and Gentile to fellowship together and he built his mission strategy on the hope that there would be churches where that 'the people of God' could truly be identified as one body, the body of Christ. Is that what we are aiming for?

My final reflection is that this has been a 'firstfruits' conference. The firstfruits of the harvest were worth having in themselves; they provided something tangible and edible, but at the same time they were only the beginning. They were not supposed to be the whole harvest;

there was a promise of more to come. This conference has been a good beginning...but we await a greater harvest.

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